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COLLECTION.

**JOHN HOMANS**

By GEORGE H. MONKS, M.D., F.A.C.S., M.R.C.S. (Eng.), Boston, Massachusetts

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*Reprint from*  
***SURGERY, GYNECOLOGY AND OBSTETRICS***  
*December, 1927, pages 844-848*



## JOHN HOMANS

BY GEORGE H. MONKS, M.D., F.A.C.S., M.R.C.S. (ENG.), BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

JOHN HOMANS, a distinguished abdominal surgeon of New England, and a pioneer in the use of ovariectomy in this part of the country, was born in Boston, Massachusetts, December 26, 1836. He was the third in direct succession to bear the name. His grandfather, John Homans, who graduated from Harvard College in the Class of 1772, was an army surgeon during the Revolutionary War. He died in 1800, leaving a son, John Homans, who graduated from Harvard College in 1812, received the degree of M.D. in 1815, and practiced medicine in Boston until he died in 1868.

John Homans, the subject of this sketch, graduated from Harvard College in 1858, and received his medical degree from the Harvard Medical School in 1862. He then entered the Massachusetts General Hospital as surgical interne.

His attention was first directed to the operation of ovariectomy by an autopsy which he performed about the year 1860 on a woman who had died with two large ovarian tumors, from which during life she had greatly suffered on account of pressure and dropsy. The experiences and opinions of certain English surgeons furnished added inspiration. He had intended to pursue the matter further, but the Civil War kept his thoughts for 4 years in another direction.

When the Civil War broke out he volunteered for service in the United States Navy, was commissioned assistant surgeon, and served on the *Aroostook* for 6 months; but, although he was much impressed by the care and method of the naval service, he found the confinement on a small vessel irksome, and he had little or no surgery to do there. Finally he succeeded in being appointed assistant surgeon in the regular Army and was ordered to New Orleans where he was assigned for service at the St. James Hospital. To quote from his autobiography<sup>1</sup>: "My duties at the St. James Hospital were very congenial. I had several wards under my care. The cases were mostly affections of the bowels or chills and fever, or malaria in some form, with debility, homesickness, and feebleness from age, the sufferers having understated their age when enlisting. Almost all the members from a Rhode Island battery that came to the hospital were over sixty."

Although, during his service in the army, he naturally had a large number of varied and instructive experiences, it would hardly be appropriate even to enumerate them here. One of his cases, however, is given at length in his own language:

"I had watched another middle aged man, who had been hobbling about the hospital, bent over and leaning on a stick, for about 3 months. He said he had

<sup>1</sup> From the address of Dr. George B. Shattuck, at the memorial meeting to Dr. John Homans, held in Boston, March 30, 1903. This quotation, and the one which follows, were taken from the autobiography of Dr. Homans, which, however, was carried only through the first part of his army service. It is a pity that Dr. Homans did not finish recording his war experiences, for, he was very keenly interested in army life, and, of course, he had the opportunity for observing them closely.



the rheumatism in his back and that he could not stand up straight or do any duty. It seemed to me that the man had better be cured and returned to duty, or discharged. There was no reason why the government should be paying for a man who was of no use. One morning I sent for the sergeant of the guard and told him to send me a strong, sensible man, who could use some judgment in a case for which I should detail him. He sent me a tall Yankee belonging to a New Hampshire regiment.

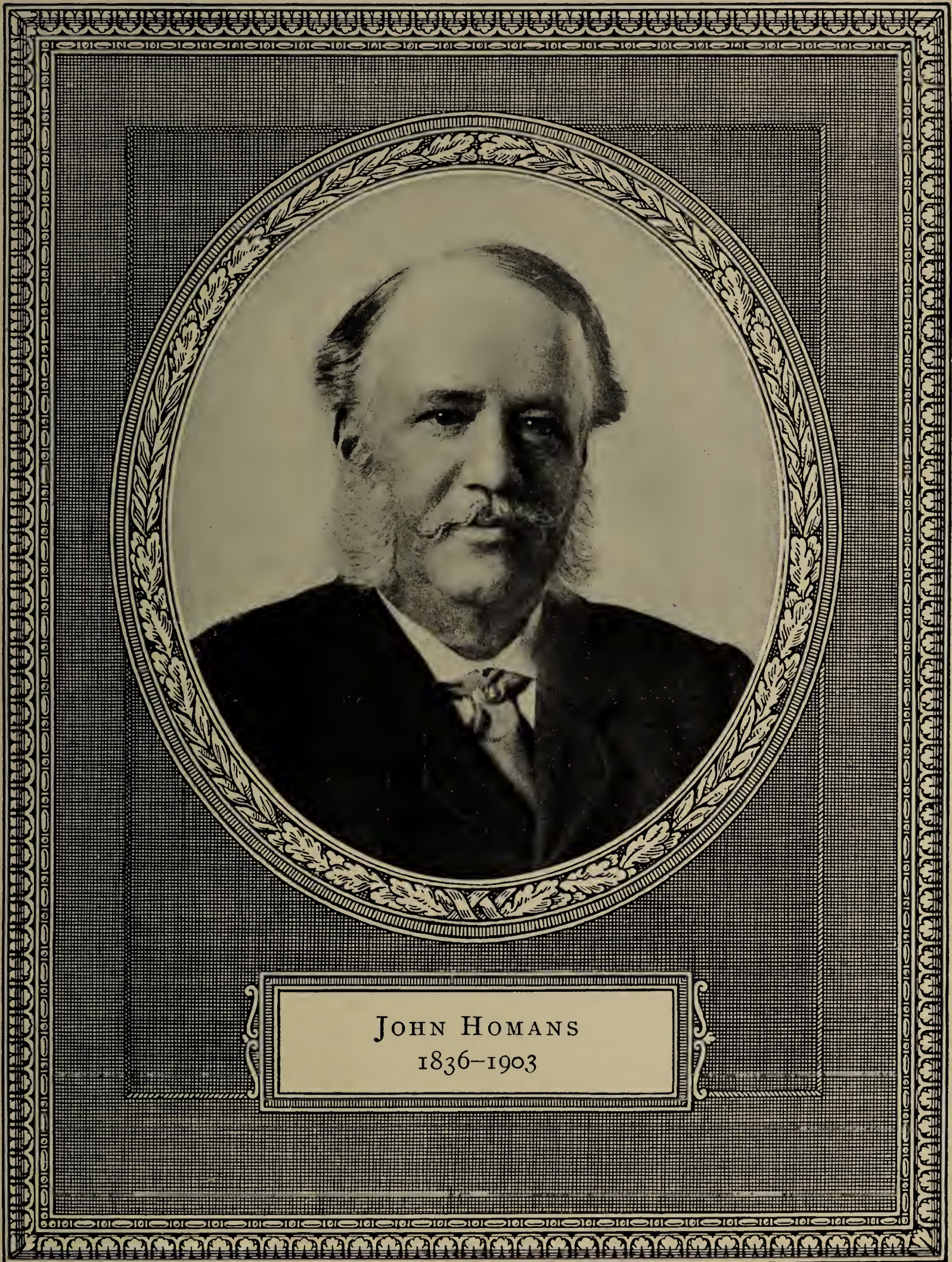
"I instructed the man to take the afflicted one on to the veranda, to take away his stick and to order him to walk up and down the veranda—if he stopped to prod him with his bayonet. I explained to the patient that I was anxious for his good and wanted to see if I could not cure him. He agreed that it was a sensible plan. In about ten minutes the soldier reported that the patient was walking on the veranda, but was sweating profusely and seemed quite tired. I said: 'Let him up for a few minutes and then keep him going according to your judgment till dinner time, and then take him out again for an hour or so after dinner.' In the afternoon the soldier and the patient reported. The sick man was walking perfectly well and the next day was returned to his regiment. I thought if the man was malingering he would soon repeat the process and get into another hospital. In the autumn of 1864, while surgeon-in-chief of the first division of the 19th Army Corps in the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia, I was hailed by a man on a mule, driving an army wagon. 'God bless your honor, I hope you are well.' 'Very well,' said I, 'and who are you?' 'I am the man you cured of rheumatism in New Orleans, God bless you.'"

In May, 1865, Dr. Homans resigned from the army, after a service, in army and navy together, of somewhat over 3 years.

Not long after leaving the army he went to Europe, where he passed most of his time in studying in Paris and Vienna, and in traveling. He then returned to Boston, November, 1866, and began the active practice of his profession. Within a reasonable period he built up a good family practice; but, as time went on, he was drawn more and more into surgery, of which ultimately he made a specialty, being one of the first physicians in Boston to do so. His experience in the army and navy was an excellent preparation for the life he had chosen; for, while he was in the army he had charge, from time to time, often in the midst of great emergencies, of large numbers of medical and surgical patients for the proper care of whom he was responsible; and, therefore, there were frequent opportunities for the exercise of rapid judgment and decision in all kinds of cases, as well as for practice in the various operative procedures. He was soon appointed surgeon to the Boston Dispensary, and some years later surgeon to the Children's Hospital, and finally to the Carney Hospital.

It was at the Carney Hospital where he began his long career as an abdominal surgeon that in 1872 he did his first ovariectomy. In 1873 he did a second





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ovariotomy, and in 1875 a third and a fourth. *His first successful ovariotomy was done in 1877.* Carbolic spray was used for the first time in this operation. The next 4 patients recovered, the spray being used at each operation. That he should have 5 successful operations with carbolic spray, after a number of deaths without the spray, made on Dr. Homans' mind a firm impression; and, although in time, in October, 1887, he gave up the antiseptic method for the aseptic one, he did so with the greatest reluctance. He performed many other ovariotomies at the Carney Hospital, where in 1880 he was made consulting surgeon.

Later, he did his operations at St. Margaret's Hospital, and his cases, of which he always made a careful study, rapidly increased in number. Many were sent to him from different parts of New England, as well as from Boston, and many also from the Provinces. Between 1872 and 1900 he performed 601 ovariotomies; and it is noteworthy that, as his experience increased, his results grew better and better.

His operations were by no means confined to ovariotomies, for he not infrequently opened the abdomen for other purposes. In April, 1881, he began to do abdominal hysterectomies. He was also one of the first surgeons to operate for abscess of the appendix. Many of the details in the operative technique of ovariotomy and hysterectomy in use today, and this statement also applies to certain operations in other parts of the abdomen, were originally devised by Dr. Homans.

"Early in his abdominal work Dr. Homans was appointed surgeon to out-patients at the Massachusetts General Hospital. Not long after this he entered the house as visiting surgeon. At that time abdominal surgery was looked upon as a specialty. By long-established precedent the introduction of specialties into the hospital was not looked upon with favor. For this reason the introduction of abdominal surgery into a general hospital met with some opposition. It is hard to realize that within twenty years abdominal surgery was regarded at the Massachusetts General Hospital as a specialty—a hospital in which more than one thousand abdominal operations were performed in 1901 and 1,155 in 1902!"<sup>1</sup>

As an operator he was conscientious, painstaking, fearless, and usually calm, although somewhat excitable when in a tight place. Occasionally, however, he would have his joke, for he had a strong sense of humor. He took the best of care of his patients after an operation, sparing himself no pains to give them a better chance for recovery, and to make them more comfortable. It may be mentioned that he had been heard to say that the best way to get patients is to take good care of those you already have.

The success of his operations and the earnestness and enthusiasm with which

<sup>1</sup>From remarks made by Dr. Maurice H. Richardson at the memorial meeting of March 30, 1903.

he did his work attracted the attention of the entire profession in this vicinity; and many young men witnessed his operations, or followed his cases, with intense interest, among them being such well-known surgeons as Dr. Maurice H. Richardson and Dr. Arthur T. Cabot. He always kept a list of those persons who were interested in his work, and, after he had made all his arrangements for the operation, he had a notice sent to each one of them. Later some of these young men, stimulated by his example, not only had their own cases of ovariectomy, but applying his methods, extended the area of their own operative procedures to the remotest parts of the abdomen.

Although most of his time was taken up with operating and in attending to his cases, he still was able to do a good deal of writing, and from time to time medical or surgical articles from his hand appeared in the medical journals. In 1887 he published a very important one, entitled: "Three Hundred and Eighty-Four Laparotomies for Various Diseases."

In 1881 he was appointed clinical instructor in the diagnosis and treatment of ovarian tumors in the Harvard Medical School, and for years he lectured there on that subject. Early in his career, he gave a regular quiz course in anatomy (extramural), and this was continued for many years. He was a member of the American Surgical Association, of the Society of the Cincinnati, of which his grandfather was a founder, and of the order of the Loyal Legion. He was also the medical examiner of the New England Life Insurance Company.

He died, after a short illness, at his home in Boston, February 7, 1903, in his sixty-sixth year, leaving a widow and six children, three sons and three daughters. One son, who bears his name, is at present a practicing surgeon in Boston.

Three years after his death the John Homans Professorship of Surgery was established in the Harvard Medical School by his friends and associates. This was indeed a fitting memorial!

In the large number of successful operations which he performed Dr. Homans made a definite contribution to the world; but the real value of his services was especially demonstrated by his leading the way in the development of one of the major operations of the abdomen; and also, by his example, in furnishing the incentive to others to follow in his footsteps.

Members of the medical profession had a great respect for Dr. Homans, and they had a full appreciation of what he had accomplished. He was familiarly and affectionately referred to as "Uncle John" or as "Honest John Homans." It is refreshing to record the life of a man who possessed so many admirable characteristics. His intelligence, persistence, and courage, his modesty, cheerfulness, and strong sense of humor, when added to those good qualities already referred to, or suggested, combined to make a personality which is as rare as it is attractive.





